THE MARCH OF WAR IN NORTH AFRICA

WHEN the Allies invaded French North Africa in November 1942, they were not quick enough to frustrate Axis countermeasures. Slowed down by a lack of supplies on the one hand, and by inefficiency and indecision on the other, the British First Army, under General Anderson, which had moved eastward along the Mediterranean coast, was stopped by German and Italian formations. These latter had been transported to Tunisia by air, and while consolidating their position in a narrow circle in the northeastern part of the country, they had taken up strong defense positions whence they were able to repulse the attackers.

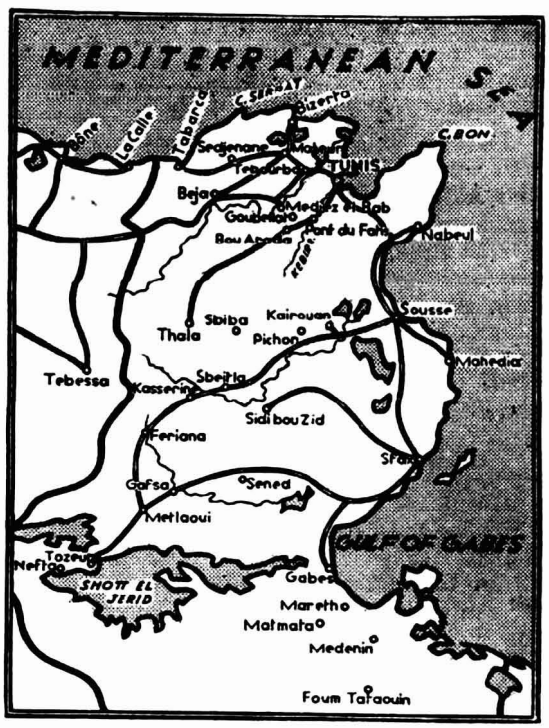
Simultaneous with these operations, Axis forces had pushed southward from Tunis and northward from Tripolitania, thus securing the entire coastal strip of eastern Tunisia, with its strategic ports and communication lines, against the attempts of French dissident troops advancing towards Kairouan and American detachments operating from Tebessa towards central and southern Tunisia.

During the following weeks both sides were busy organizing their communications. A stream of reinforcements went across the straits between southern Italy and Tunisia to bolster the fighting strength of the Axis. Both the opposing air forces were active, bombing supply bases and contesting for air superiority, which so far seems to have remained with the Axis.

ARNIM AND ROMMEL

Gradually the area held by the German forces in the north was expanded, better positions being gained, notably by the capture of Tebourba and the advance on Medjez el Bab. Strengthened by armored detachments, the Axis forces in Tunisia were placed under the command of General von Arnim who, on January 18, captured Pont du Fahs and pursued the French in that sector in a southwesterly direction along the Kebir River, at the same time pressing towards some of the passes north of Bou Arada. Further south, fighting flared up between Kairouan and Pichon, leading to a retreat on the part of the French defenders. This phase of the battle lasted until January 24 and netted the Axis troops a booty of 21 tanks, 70 guns, 200 trucks, and plenty of other material captured, as well as some 4,000 prisoners.

While this was happening in Tunisia, Marshal Rommel continued to withdraw his army westward, evading all outflanking maneuvers of the British Eighth Army under General Montgomery. He evacuated Tripolis, which was occupied by the British on January 23, and finally took up positions in the Mareth Line. This system of fortifications is roughly fifty miles long. It is situated between the Gulf of Gabes and the Shott el Jerid and was constructed by the French. While Marshal Rommel's rear guards were fighting a delaying action south of this line, his main body of troops strengthened the fortifications already in existence. At that time Allied estimates figured the strength of the Axis forces in Tunisia at



around 160,000 to 180,000 men, as against 200,000 Anglo-American troops excluding the French dissident detachments.

THE AXIS PUSHES WEST

Another phase of the battle began at the end of January, when an important pass east of Sidi bou Zid, on the road between Sfax and Sbeitla, was captured by Axis forces, as well as the city of Sened on the Sfax/Gafsa railway. Continued pressure of the Axis then led to the capture of Sidi bou Zid, Gafsa, Kasserine and Metlaoui, (February 17). Exploiting their successes, the Germans advanced along the northwestern shore of the Shott el Jerid beyond Tozeur to Nefta, and also from Kasserine in a northerly direction towards Thala, occupying Sbeitla and Feriana, which had been evacuated by the Americans. Allied reports, showing great alarm, were already speaking of a threat to the American base of operations, the city of Tebessa, and British troops were dispatched from northern Tunisia to support the Allied front on the central and southern sectors, when the Germans stopped their advance on February 25. In this drive, the Axis forces took 4,015 prisoners and captured or destroyed 235 tanks, 169 armored cars, 160 guns and gun carriages, one ammunition depot, 15 planes, and many trucks and other war booty. After that, the Germans withdrew again from Feriana, Kasserine, Sbeitla, Gafsa, and all districts west of these places, to take up positions particularly favorable for defense.

Hardly had these operations in central and western Tunisia been completed, when the Axis staged a successful thrust in the northern part of the country. After having gained ground near Medjez el Bab and Beja, the Axis forces reached Goubellat, north of Bou Arada, at the end of February. On March 7, a spearhead advancing along the coast captured Cape Serrat. Sedjenane, south of Cape Serrat, had been evacuated by the British shortly before.

SITUATION IN THE SOUTH

Meanwhile the first mobile units of the British Eighth Army had crossed the frontier between Libya and Tunisia on February 7. General Montgomery's outflanking maneuvers were invariably foiled, but by February 20 the British were established in the area between Medenin and Foum-Tataouin, whence they cautiously made reconnoitering sorties against the Mareth Line. On March 6 the Axis forces launched a surprise attack against this area of deployment which yielded valuable information on the British plans. By the middle of March, the real struggle on this front had not yet commenced, but there were signs that the British were preparing for a major attack.

The withdrawal of Marshal Rommel's army from Libya coupled with the Axis offensives in central and southern Tunisia have permitted all Axis troops on African soil to join hands in that French colony and to concentrate their entire strength in a country with excellent natural possibilities for defense or attack and with a highly developed system of railways and roads.

FIRST TEST FOR AMERICANS

The fighting in Tunisia gave the American Fifth Army its first chance to prove its mettle against German and Italian troops. It was also the first chance for the newly appointed American commander in chief of all Allied forces in North Africa, General Eisenhower, to show his qualities in more than just an occupation of practically undefended areas. Neither he nor his American troops have stood the test too well. The British, who had so often been told by people from the other side of the Atlantic how the war ought to be conducted, were even a little malicious in their comments. The English journalist Cummings in the *News Chronicle* called the American troops "greenhorns" and suggested that the American officers were chiefly to blame for the lack of good training methods and sufficient technical knowledge. General Catroux, French dissident leader, regarded the setback suffered by the Americans as a "major defeat"; and Reuter's special correspondent with the British First Army, Haig Nicholson, revealed that, according to letters found in the battle area, German soldiers consider service on the Tunisian front against the Anglo-American forces as a "picnic" compared to the fighting in Russia.

The Americans themselves did not agree on the reasons. The US Secretary of War Stimson said at a press conference that this defeat was not unexpected, inasmuch as the American positions in central Tunisia had been weak. Contrary to this declaration, the *New York Herald Tribune* was unable to understand why General Eisenhower, in spite of his superior forces in men and material, had failed to prevent the German successes. Senator John H. Bankhead.

Democrat from Alabama, blamed inadequate and ineffective equipment for the setback; but General Sommerwell, US Chief of Army Supplies who had just returned from an inspection tour in North Africa, denied this charge, without, however, coming forward with any other reasons.

THE GENERALS

Nearest to reality, perhaps, came the *New York Times*, which commented that the first reason was to be found in "political squabbles over fictitious issues which deflect attention from the immediate military task," and the second reason in the "need for American troops to get battle experience, which can only be done by fighting." While the latter needs no amplification, it may be pertinent to point out with regard to the former that seasoned British generals have, evidently for political considerations, been subordinated to General Eisenhower. It is interesting to note that one of the first measures taken by the British General Alexander, the second-in-command of the Allied troops in North Africa, was to separate the British troops from the American and French ones, all of whom will henceforth fight separately.

The German armies in Tunisia are under the commands of Marshal Rommel (who is directing operations in the southern and central part of the country) and General von Arnim (who is holding the northern sector). Both are, of course, co-ordinating their strategy. They are faced in the north by the British First Army under General Anderson; in the center by the American Fifth Army under General Carr, with French dissident troops interspersed in this sector; and in the south by the British Eighth Army under General Montgomery. To the northwest of the great salt lakes, French forces under the de Gaullist General Le Clerc, who marched with his men through the Sahara from Lake Chad, apparently form the link between the British Eighth Army and the American Fifth Army.

During the fighting of the past few months a number of French soldiers in the Allied ranks were taken prisoner. As many of them had been forced into Allied service, the Axis is not treating these men as prisoners of war but is sending them back to their homes in France or Tunisia. Reports from both camps confirm that the fighting morale of the French troops is, on the whole, pretty low. This is not surprising in view of the quarrels between various French factions, especially between Giraud and de Gaulle and their respective backers. A large number of Frenchmen have already reached their homes.

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More than four months have passed since the Anglo-American invasion of North Africa, which was heralded by the Allies as the "turning point of the war." So far the results of this effort have been rather meager. Our assumption that it would prove much easier for the Allies to land their troops in North Africa than to keep them supplied has turned out to be correct, thanks to the efficiency demonstrated by Axis submarines and planes in their attacks upon the Anglo-American routes of supply.